

Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Hebrew Union College Day of Learning
March 14, 2009

Thank you Dean Windmueller for inviting me to this program and for your dedicated leadership of the college. You will be sorely missed upon your retirement this summer. Your work, as a scholar, an educator and a mentor, has had a lasting impact on HUC and its students.

I have no doubt that Sue Hochberg of the campus Board of Governors and the incoming Dean, Dr. Holo, are emboldened by the strong leadership you have provided in preparation for the transition.

I am honored to receive the college's honorary Doctorate. HUC had originally invited me to receive the degree at the college's commencement ceremony in 2008. But the graduation coincided with Israel's celebration of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the State. Speaker Pelosi asked me, as the longest serving Jewish Member of the House of Representatives, to join her in representing the US Congress at the ceremonies.

During my thirty-five years as a Congressman, I have been proud to play a role in many of the events that impacted Israel and the Jewish people. I appreciate that the HUC community was understanding and gave me a few extra semesters to earn my honorary degree.

I have to say it feels like the tables are turned today. When I'm in a room full of Rabbis, I'm usually doing the listening. But I want to thank the HUC faculty and all the congregations represented here today and recognize Paul Lippe for his hard work to put this day of learning together.

When I saw that today's program was scheduled so soon before Passover, I turned to the Passover Haggadah. In just two weeks, after all the cleaning and shopping and cooking, we will sit down to our seders. And as we engage in the key mitzvah of retelling the story of the Exodus, the Haggadah instructs us to first lift up the matzah and pronounce that all who are hungry should come and eat – *“kol dichfin yetzeh v'yichol”* – and that all who are in need be invited to have a seat at our table – *“kol ditzrich yetzeh v'yifsach.”*

No one is marginalized at the seder. This message for me is a core value of Judaism. It is a theme repeated throughout the Haggadah:

- Matzah is referred to as the poor man's bread, not only because it is meager but also because no one is too poor to partake in the Afikomen, the taste of freedom.
- None of the four sons are deemed too smart, or rebellious, disinterested or simply uninformed. Everyone is a stakeholder in the Exodus from Egypt.

Judaism believes in the equality of opportunity because every man and woman is created in God's image. And Judaism espouses the importance of a communal safety net to make sure no one is left behind.

It is a theme that appears often in the Torah and in Jewish law.

- We are commanded to reach out to the widow, the orphan and the stranger.
- We are told to leave the remnants of the harvest for the needy to collect.

- We are taught to remove obstacles in the path of the blind.
- In our shops, we to keep honest weights and measures.
- At the height of the celebration of Purim we are to give gifts to the poor.
- And at the depths of the fast of Yom Kippur we hear a haftorah from the book of Isaiah that reproaches us not to think that fasting alone is sufficient unless we free the oppressed, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked.

I saw these values often in my own home.

My family lived above a grocery store that my father Lou owned in the Watts neighborhood. When people hit hard times he would let them buy on credit. Well, he called it credit, but it amounted to dignity for fathers and mothers trying to put food on the table.

My Uncle Al ran a newspaper, the LA Reporter – often called the Waxman Reporter - that featured stories about corporate corruption. It ingrained in me the importance of accountability and transparency to ensure that consumers have confidence in the products they buy and that workers have a fair playing field to ensure their safety and job security.

I was raised by New Deal Democrats who felt that government had a role in ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to succeed and that a safety net should be available to make sure that no one is marginalized because of age or disability.

I have no doubt that what drew me to politics were the esteem I felt for public service and my commitment to Jewish values like the concept in the Haggadah of helping all people be able to realize their full potential.

While I do not believe that the role of government is to guarantee the equality of results, I sincerely believe that government does have a profound role in giving all people an equal opportunity to succeed.

Some of what I consider to be and my own greatest legislative accomplishments revolve around this principle. And I am very proud to have built a strong record of progressive legislation in the environment, health care, and consumer protection.

Over the years, I have championed legislation, that is now law, in all these areas:

- Legislation limiting toxic air emissions, so that we can all breathe cleaner air ...
- Expanding Medicaid coverage for the poor and the elderly..
- Banning smoking on airplanes ...and placing tobacco where it belongs, under the strict supervision of the Food and Drug Administration ...
- Funding the first government-sponsored HIV/AIDS research ...
- Lowering drug prices through generic alternatives and fostering the development of new drugs to treat rare diseases ...

- Keeping food free of pesticides, and labeling it with nutritional information so you know what you are eating ...
- Establishing federal standards for nursing homes to protect the elderly from abuse and neglect ...

More than ever, I wanted to build on these causes when Barack Obama was elected President of the United States.

Because of his election, based on the vision he outlined for our country, I sought to become Chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee – the committee that would legislate the lion's share of the Obama agenda.

I did become Chairman, and we moved firmly to tackle big issues like health care reform and climate change.

- We passed the Affordable Health Care for America Act
- We passed the Waxman-Markey American Clean Energy and Security Act

We have the greatest medical technology in the world, the best health professionals, but we are saddled with a health system that is going to bankrupt us as a country. It is a system where millions of Americans live daily with the fear that they are just one serious illness away from financial catastrophe for themselves and their families.

Just last month, here in California, Anthem Blue Cross moved to raise its premiums in the individual insurance market by up to 39%. We brought Anthem before our committee and demanded accountability on this issue. If we finally pass health legislation – and I believe we will – the bill will include a provision giving the President the authority to roll back such greedy rate increases.

Together with President Obama, we wanted to act on energy and climate legislation, to protect our national security and to rebuild our economic vitality.

Our dependence on Middle East oil, sourced from hostile and unstable regimes, has shackled our military and our foreign policy. If we do nothing, there is nothing to prevent a return to the cruel economic burden of \$4 per gallon gas. And if we don't start investing in the research, jobs and training for a green economy, other nations like China are more than eager to gain an edge.

In this Congress, the House has passed:

- A concrete stimulus package, which saved and created millions of jobs.
- Children's Health Insurance, which provides health coverage to millions of low income children.
- Legislation putting tobacco and its marketing programs where they belong – under the Food and Drug Administration.
- Legislation extending the Ryan White HIV/AIDS program.
- Legislation to re-regulate the financial services sector, which failed us so spectacularly in 2008 and 2009.

The common denominator of all these initiatives is simple:

We have to seize the opportunity to put our country back on the right track, to do some good, and to help improve our society.

Our Jewish values teach us to embrace these opportunities every day and to look for opportunities to engage in tzedakah and Tikkun Olam.

It is an inspiration for my work in Congress and I'm sure it is an inspiration for the work all of you do to make our community, our country and our world a better place.

Thank you for the great honor you have bestowed on me.